

The tragic sight of the battleship Arizona burning after the attack on Pearl Harbor is etched in our national memory. But fewer remember the Oklahoma, another battleship hit on December 7, 1941. A television producer asked me to write a film script about it, and eventually I managed to track down the phone number of someone who, I was told, might have been an eyewitness. When I called, he said in an accent I could not place: "Nobody knows this story. Not my wife, not my children."

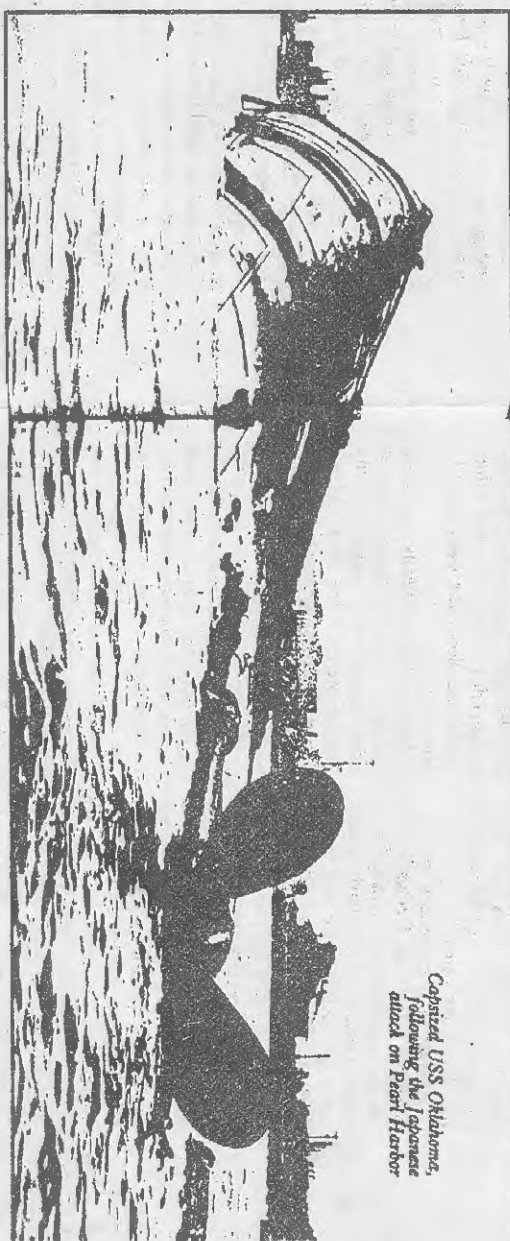
"Come on up, I tell you everything. I remember everything."

THE DECEMBER sun was barely edging over the horizon when Joe Bulgo, a 21-year-old shipyard worker, walked through the gates of Honolulu's Pearl Harbor Navy Yard. It was

Sunday morning, so the big shop buildings and repair basin were nearly deserted. Beyond them lay the entire Pacific Battleship Fleet, peacefully at anchor.

Joe had come to this base from a pineapple plantation on the island of Maui, where he was born. At six feet, with broad shoulders and thick arms, he seemed never to tire, and never complained. He would do any job, anytime. After all, he had taken an oath to do what the Navy said.

Today his orders were to caulk



Capitulated USS Oklahoma, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor

No Medals for Joe

By MAVO SIMON

and test a new sea valve on the destroyer *Shaw*. He changed into his work clothes and picked up his pneumatic hammer, the biggest one made. When other workers tried to use this chipping gun, it would fly out of their hands. But Joe could hold it. On his way to the vessel, he heard a ship's band playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" for the morning flag-raising.

Then a familiar drone filled the sky. When Joe saw waves of aircraft flying in formation across the harbor, he assumed it was an Army exercise. He thought, *I didn't know we had that many planes*. But within seconds, plumes of water began kicking up among the ships, and he saw the planes' insignia: the rising sun.

Pandemonium broke loose, and Joe ran for cover. Screaming planes swooped low, bombing and strafing the docks and harbor. The *Shaw* rose up in a fiery cloud, its bow blown off. Torpedoes shattered into the *Oklahoma*; the *Arizona* exploded. Ship after ship—destroyers, cruisers, minelayers—turned over and sank. After two hours of hell, the in-

vaders vanished, leaving behind an eerie silence—and unbelievable destruction. All the workers were enraged. They wanted to fight back, but had nothing to fight back with. Eventually Joe received new orders. "Get down to the dock with your chipping outfit," a supervisor shouted to him. "They want you on the *Oklahoma*!"

A launch took him across the channel. Half obscured by black clouds of smoke, battleships were settling to the bottom of the harbor. Hundreds of bodies floated in the water. The *Arizona* was burning, huge flames engulfing its twisted superstructure.

The *Oklahoma* was unrecognizable. All that was left of the huge

ship was a curving piece of hull sticking out of the water. It looked like a stranded gray whale.

Standing on the hull under the smoky sky were the chipping gang from Shop 11 and Joe's boss, Julio DeCastro. "Come on," he yelled at Joe. "Let's get going!"

At least three torpedoes had capsized the *Oklahoma*, DeCastro told Joe. Its masts were stuck in the mud at the bottom of the harbor, and some 400 sailors were still inside. "Listen," DeCastro said. Joe could hear the trapped sailors tapping on the steel beneath his feet.

The workers tried to cut into the hull with their chipping guns, but it was hard going. "Chipping guns not made to cut through steel this thick," Joe finally told DeCastro. "Why not burn them out?"

DeCastro showed him an open black patch in the hull. Before he arrived, the burner gang from a Navy ship had tried using acetylene torches. A cork-lined compartment had been set afire, and two trapped sailors had suffocated. "We have no choice," said DeCastro.

Joe started up his gun with an ear-splitting clatter. He leaned into the bulkhead, made two cuts and helped bend out a patch. Then he went down into the ship and relieved several exhausted workers chipping at a deck inside.

It was boiling hot. No air. They kept looking for a way to get to the trapped men. But the ship was upside down, and it was impossible to figure where they were. As they

drilled, they hit oil tanks, waste tanks, dead ends, and would have to plug up and start over. They knew that, little by little, they were letting out all the ship's trapped air—the only thing keeping the water level down. The more holes they made, the closer the men were to drowning.

Joe worked tirelessly, opening bulkhead after bulkhead, only to find himself in a maze of tiny compartments filled with debris. Sometimes he came upon smashed bodies of sailors in passageways, but he had to keep going.

Whenever Joe paused, he could hear desperate tapping reverberating through the ship. *Save me, save me*, the terrified sailors were saying. *Give me life...* That sound would live in Joe's marrow forever.

Night fell, and the clatter of the chipping guns continued. Fully expecting another Japanese attack, the workers could not use lights on the hull. Instead, they relied on the grisly illumination from the burning *Arizona*.

Toward midnight, when Joe cut into the hull, water bubbled out. He tasted it: sweet. He had hit a freshwater tank. DeCastro found a pump, and after several agonizing hours, they had removed enough water so they could crawl into the tank.

They drilled open its bottom, and a shout went up: inside was a dry, white shaft. *A way in!*

As the others unrolled the hose of his pneumatic hammer, Joe cau-

tiously slid into the shaft with only a cage lantern to light his way. Deeper and deeper he went past the ribs of the upside-down ship. He felt like Jonah in the belly of the whale.

Suddenly the ship began to sway and groan. *Joe's stomach tightened in terror. If it starts to settle, I'm gone.*

Fighting the urge to turn back, he tried to catch his breath in the choking stench of oil and sewage.

Then he heard the tapping. Faint. Steady. Joe tapped back with his chisel on the sweating metal bulkhead. *Come on, he thought. Tell me where you are. Finally, an-*

sweering taps. Joe slid down farther and cocked his head, listening hard. He called for help from DeCastro. The two lifted open a manhole cover, and Joe slipped into an empty compartment. He heard the sound once more. Tap tap tap. It was coming from the other side of the bulkhead.

Joe tapped again. Suddenly voices were shouting: "Hurry! Walter's coming up!"

Joe's chipping gun dug into the steel with an angry clatter. When trapped air came out with a *whoosh*, the sailors tried to stop it with their fingers. "Don't do that!" Joe yelled. "I'm going to cut it fast." He was a good worker, but he'd never cut so rapidly in his life.

Water was rising to Joe's waist now. But he refused to be distracted from his work. *Keep on going, he told himself. Get them out.*

After cutting three sides, Joe was

able to pry open the steel. Immediately the sailors came out in a huge rush of water—kids smeared with oil, hardly able to move or breathe after being trapped for over 20 hours. None had the strength to get to the hatch. So Joe said, "Here, up on my back!"

One by one they climbed on his broad back, and he lifted them to the hatch, where other workers pulled them to safety. By the time the last sailor got out, the water was up to Joe's neck. He scrambled up his hose line, and DeCastro scaled the hatch behind him.

Joe blinked in the sunlight, filling his lungs with fresh air. The sailors, wrapped in blankets, were already in the launch that was taking them to the hospital ship. Joe shouted and waved, but they were too far away to hear. He watched them disappear across the gray harbor.

All told, more than 400 died in the sunken ship, but over four days and nights, Joe Bulgo and the rest of the chipping gang saved 32 men.

Later that year, Navy citations "for heroic work with utter disregard of personal safety" were awarded to Joe Bulgo, Julio DeCastro and 18 others from Shop 11.

AFTER THE WAR, Joe married, had four children and joined the merchant marine. During the Vietnam war, he returned to work for the Navy on a chipping gang at the San Francisco Bay Naval Shipyard. When his family said he was work-

ing too hard, he'd reply, "Our boys are over there dying. They need these ships."

In 1971, he had his first heart attack. After a second attack, he retired.

The most precious thing he owned, his citation, was lost when somebody stole his suitcase in a bus station. He wrote letter after letter to Washington. He finally got a copy of the citation, with a letter saying he might have a medal coming. He waited, wrote more letters. Nothing happened. It seemed the rescue was a forgotten episode about a forgotten ship.

That was true, strong Joe Bulgo told me in 1986 when I turned up at his door, 45 years after Pearl Harbor. I kept thinking to myself: *This man deserves a medal. Well, if nothing else, the film will give him and his fellow shipyard workers the recognition they merit.*

But the film was never made, the idea shelved by the network. Discouraged, I put everything away—the script, my notes, the documents, the reminiscences of sailors—and I went on to something else.

Almost a year later, I got a call from Al Ellis of the U.S.S. Oklahoma Association, an organization for everyone who had ever served on the ship. Would I speak at their next convention in San Jose?

I was about to politely decline when I remembered something Joe had told me. At the end of the interview, he had said, "You know,

I never seen any of those boys I saved. It was all in the dark and so quick. I wish I could have talked with them once."

On May 16, 1987, I waited in the San Jose hotel, where 200 ex-sailors and their wives were meeting. I knew Joe was coming—his wife, Val, had told me how excited he was to have been invited—but I also knew he was ill. Bone cancer, she had said.

Even so, when Val and their daughter, Linda, brought Joe into the big convention room, I was shocked. He was in a wheelchair. His once-powerful body had shrunk. His eyes were filled with pain. "How you doing, Joe?" I said. He pulled my head down and whispered, "Thinking about this night is what's kept me alive."

They seated the Bulgo family in front of the head table. A Navy chaplain gave the invocation. We ate. The master of ceremonies told jokes. Then a band started to play, and everyone was laughing, drinking, dancing. Joe sat stiffly in his chair, his food untouched. I wondered, *Will people actually want to listen to an old war story?*

Finally they introduced me, and I began to speak. I told them one sailor's story from that dark December day at Pearl Harbor. How he and ten others had been trapped in a compartment slowly filling with water. How for 37 hours they'd banged frantically against the bulkhead, hoping—praying—

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that someone might save them. And how, finally, a young worker had cut through the bulkhead, releasing them all. I described how the rescuer, in the account of the sailors, had said to the sailors, "Take, on my back."

and then lifted each one to safety. The crowd was quiet as I read off the names of the sailors rescued that day. "I know three of those men are here tonight. And I also know you never got a chance to thank him. So if there's something you'd like to say to that Hawaiian kid who risked his life to save yours 46 years ago—well, he's right over there."

It is impossible to describe the emotions that swept the hall as I pointed to Joe, and 200 people rose to their feet, cheering. He covered his face with his napkin. He didn't wait them to see him crying. Then three elderly veterans embraced the man who could no longer stand, even to acknowledge the applause, but on whose broad, strong back they had once been carried.

Joe Bulgo died two months later. When the San Francisco Examiner called me, I told them what I knew. His obituary begins: "Joseph Bulgo, Jr., a neglected hero of Pearl Harbor...."

Well, yes—there hadn't been any medals for Joe. But, I thought to myself, in the end we made things right. We said thank you, at last, to an American hero.

Ship Rescue from Capsized Battleship

DECEMBER 8TH

6000 From Compartment D-57/12 (Radio NY)
Thamser, G. J. Sea 1c
Roberts, N. O. Sea 1c
Roberts, H. S. Sea 1c
Cycenman, R. A. Sea 1c
Smith, M. R. RM 3c
Hanson, T. F. Sea 1c

1100 From Compartment D-57 (Lucky Bag)

Gorman, S. W. Sea 1c
Baker, E. W. Sea 2c
Tribben, R. L. Sea 2c
Adams, K. Sea 1c
Schaff, W. P. Sea 1c
Young, S. B. Sea 1c
Scott, F. H. Sea 1c
Davenport, R. M. Sea 1c

1400 From Compartment D-55-M (Cabin Handing Room)

Wells, E. D. Sea 1c
O'Connell, B. W. Sea 2c
Harrington, H. W. Sea 2c
Pittman, D. L. Sea 2c
Russett, C. E. Sea 2c

1400 From Compartment D-43 (Sawing Room, 4th)

Arthur, R. L. Sea 1c
Bald, W. A. Sea 1c
Kane, G. L. Sea 1c
Bourne, J. C. Sea 1c
BMA, A. L. Sea 1c
Kearney, H. S. Sea 1c
Thompson, I. S. Sea 1c
Dallong, G. A. Sea 1c

1600 From Compartment A-34

Scott, W. F. Sea 1c
Cassidy, J. P. Sea 1c

1800 From Compartment D-57 (Lucky Bag)

Gorman, S. W. Sea 1c
Baker, E. W. Sea 2c
Tribben, R. L. Sea 2c
Adams, K. Sea 1c
Schaff, W. P. Sea 1c
Young, S. B. Sea 1c
Scott, F. H. Sea 1c
Davenport, R. M. Sea 1c

1400 From Compartment D-55-M (Cabin Handing Room)

Wells, E. D. Sea 1c
O'Connell, B. W. Sea 2c
Harrington, H. W. Sea 2c
Pittman, D. L. Sea 2c
Russett, C. E. Sea 2c

B.C. ***

RECALL
Nov 87

Joseph Bulgo Jr., saved 11 in Pearl Harbor attack

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A civilian whose heroism during Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was not discovered until a screenwriter unearthed his story a year ago has died of cancer at the age of 67.

Joseph Bulgo Jr. was a shipyard worker when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. He cut through the hull of the overturned battleship USS Oklahoma and pulled 11 trapped sailors to safety.

He told them one by one as he pulled them through a hole he cut with drills and his pneumatic chipping hammer, "Climb on my back. I'll get you out."

They had been trapped in blackness in water up to their necks. He lifted each of them until fellow workers above could reach down and grab them.

A total of 32 men were saved. An additional 442 crew members were trapped and drowned when the Oklahoma, hit by bombs and torpedoes, overturned on battleship row.

Screenwriter Mayo Simon of Pa-

cific Palisades spent more than a year researching the rescue before he was able to name each of the 11 men saved and trace Bulgo to San Francisco.

Simon said the government gave Bulgo a small citation, which was stolen. When a copy was requested, the hero received no answer. The story has not yet been made into a movie.

In May, Bulgo attended the annual convention of the Oklahoma Association in San Jose, and was introduced for the first time to three of the men he had saved.

"There was pandemonium," Simon said.

"There were tears and hugs and kisses, while he sat there in his wheelchair," he said.

Bulgo, who died Tuesday, joined the merchant marine after the war and remained a sailor until 1955. He worked at Hunters Point Shipyard in San Francisco until he retired in 1970.

He is survived by his wife, Valerie, a son, three daughters and six grandchildren.

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